

Letcher Co. ATC Principal Barbara Ison to retire June 30 after 35 years in career and technical education



A 35 year career rich in accomplishments requires one to have gratitude for the professionals who work tirelessly to achieve goals, to believe in yourself and your mission, and to love family and friends as well as what it takes to make a difference in the lives of students.

As evidenced by the stones on her home hearth, these are the principles Barbara Ison followed during her rewarding career.

The daughter of a coal miner, auto mechanic and welder, Barbara Ison was born and raised in Whitesburg, Kentucky. From the day she was born, vocational skills have been present in her life. One of four daughters by Edward and Pauline Ison, Barbara lives only two miles down the road from where she grew up.

"I look back now and realize that while I grew up not having everything I wanted, I had everything I needed," said Ison. "We lived in the country and raised a garden, canned and preserved our own food, helped our neighbors and I still do that today."

Her mother was a talented seamstress, quilter and perfectionist. She taught Barbara to sew and quilt at a young age – something she still does in her spare time.

"My mother believed in doing things right the first time," says Ison. "After picking out quilting stitches a few times because they didn't meet her standards, I learned very quickly that *it is easier to do it right the first time*. And, that's something I still live by. It's what I've taught my daughter and now, my granddaughter. No matter what I do in life, I try to do it right the first time. "



Barbara and daughter Jessica, an RN.

Ison's mother completed the 9th grade and her father graduated from high school. "There was never a question as to what was expected from me and my sisters," says Ison. "We were never told we had to make A's; we just thought we had to do the best and be the best."

While she grew up in a time of great challenge, common sense values were at the root of her upbringing; and Ison believes that the values she learned from her parents shaped her into the responsible individual she is today. She attributes her success as a teacher, guidance counselor, project director and principal to how she was raised.

Upon graduation from high school, Ison attended Morehead State University (MSU) where she completed an undergraduate degree in home economics in December 1975. An over-achiever from the onset, she earned her degree in three and one-half years. On her way home from college, she stopped by the Hazard Community College to see if they had any teaching positions available. When she got home, the phone rang. It was Hazard City Schools' superintendent James Caudill. He wanted to know if she was interested in a job teaching home economics.

"Of course I said yes, and he wanted to know when I could come in to sign the papers," said Ison.



She officially began her teaching career in January 1976 and for the next 3 ½ years, she was the Hazard High School home economics instructor. Ison had just turned 21 years old. Some of her students were 19 years-old. Her ability to believe in herself served her well.

While teaching, Ison continued her education at MSU and finished a master's degree in vocational education in 1977. However, she had always wanted to be a guidance counselor and finished a master's degree in guidance and counseling in 1979, as well as her Rank I.



"I look back at all the people who helped me along the way and I am sure my desire to be a guidance counselor was to give something back for all I had been given," said Ison.

During the 1979-80 school year, she went to work in the state's vocational education Region 12. She was hired by Walter Prater, the regional director. Ison served as a guidance counselor across the region at the Lee Co., Breathitt Co., and Letcher Co. Area Vocational Education Centers (AVECs). But another opportunity would come knocking.

There was a need for a 7th and 8th grade science and health teacher at Carr Creek Elementary, so Ison expanded her experience to include teaching middle school students during the 1980-81 school year.

In October 1981, Ison made another change. She began working for Kentucky State Government in the Cabinet for Human Resources as the Channeling project director. It was a research project designed to determine cost effectiveness in services for the elderly in their own homes or whether they should be institutionalized. She served as project director until August 15, 1985.

Six months prior to her leaving Channeling, Regional Director Finley Begley began calling her on a regular basis to come back to vocational education as a guidance counselor in his region. Because of his persistence, Ison returned and started working August 16, 1985 as a counselor for the Leslie Co., Lee Co. and Breathitt Co. AVECs.



Photo at right: Barbara Ison and Regional Director Finley Begley



Begley and Ison

"If it had not been for Finley, I would not have come back," said Ison. "After my return to vocational education, I changed positions several times because Finley saw something in me that I didn't see myself. He gave me the opportunity to grow personally and professionally."

One such opportunity came about as a result of some concerns at the Leslie County AVEC. Begley took Ison over to personally meet the Leslie County Schools superintendent. As a result of a positive meeting, she began as interim principal in 1986 and stayed through 1987. The stint was so successful that the superintendent asked for her to remain, but Begley had other ideas and Ison returned to the Region 12 office. There, she became involved in numerous projects and activities at the regional and state levels.

In 1993, she returned home to Whitesburg to become the Kentucky Tech-Letcher County Area Technology Center principal. It is here where she will finish out her career in vocational-technical education.

"My work history has all been in education and state government, and I can truly say I have had a wonderful career," says Ison. "I have had great supervisors who gave me an opportunity to succeed. I would not change a thing about my career. And, finally, I want to thank my staff – each of you has brought something positive to the mission of providing technical education and skills training for our students. Thank you."

KY Tech-Letcher County ATC faculty and staff

In August 1993, Ison began serving as principal of the Letcher Co. Area Technology Center. At the time, there were 11 programs and the school served over 100 adult students.

Today, there are 7 programs on site that serve both Letcher County and Jenkins Independent School Districts and 2 office technology satellite programs at Letcher Co. Central High School.



Photo above:

Front row (l to r): Vivian Back, health sciences; Barbara Ison, and Wanda Webb, administrative secretary. Middle row (l to r): William Caudill, maintenance; Kitty Back, teachers' aide; Dejah Burton and Karen Boggs, office technology; Harrison Boggs, carpentry; and Danny Adams. Back row (l to r): Thomas Collins, welding; Daryn Pigman, diesel technology; Robert Looney, electrical technology, and Casey Breeding, computer aided drafting.



KY Tech – Letcher Co. ATC front office



**Wanda Webb
Administrative Secretary:**

"I have worked with Barbara Ison for the past eighteen years. She has been an outstanding principal and co-worker. I know she is the boss here, but she makes me feel more of an equal. She discusses issues with all of us and always takes our opinions into consideration when making decisions."

"Barbara has been a wonderful, caring and considerate supervisor and I will miss her."

**Reva A. Sergent
Former Administrative Secretary:**

"I worked as Barbara's administrative secretary from 1993 until my retirement in 2009. I began my vocational career in 1972 and Barbara and I became co-workers when she began her vocational career in 1979. She has always been an advocate of vocational education and strived to make vocational education a priority for students and the community."

"I know Barbara is looking forward to retirement, but be assured her heart will always be with vocational education and vocational education will miss her input to detail and her dedication."

**Kitty Back
Teachers' Aide:**

"Ms. Ison is going to be greatly missed. She is one of the best bosses I have ever had. She is kind, fair, and very enjoyable to work with."

"She cannot be replaced. She is a wonderful friend as well. She will help you with anything that you ask if she possibly can. We will miss her."



KY Tech – Letcher Co. ATC faculty and staff

Vivian Back Health Science:

"Thoughts on Barbara Ison -

"Very knowledgeable and talented professional, with massive amounts of common sense. Barbara Ison is like no other boss I've ever had.

"She is:

- inspiration, when I think I can't***
- an extra hand, when I need three***
- the push, when I need a shove***
- the listener, when I need to vent***
- the rod, when I need reeled back in***
- but most of all, Barbara is a friend."***



Bob Looney Electrical Technology:

"Ms. Ison has always been a friendly, fair, and consistent principal. She has always been available to help with any question or problem we may have and her office door is always open to teachers or students.

"I personally have always respected her advice and the fact that she takes the time to listen to our concerns. We have always had funds available for the needs of our program, and this ensures that our students have modern and up to date equipment for training.

"It takes understanding, patience, dedication, and a lot of hard work to oversee a technical center. Barbara has these outstanding qualities and many more. It has been a pleasure to work with her, and her absence will be greatly missed."





**Casey Breeding
Computer Aided Drafting:**

"I have a great deal of respect for Ms. Ison; she has devoted her career to improving the education and lives of the students that have attended Letcher County Area Technology Center."

"This is just my second full year of teaching and Ms. Ison has gone out of her way to ease my transition from industry to education. She believes in doing everything in her power to improve the learning environment at our school and helping students to further their education. She will be greatly missed by the staff, instructors, and students."



**Harrison Boggs
Carpentry:**

"Ms. Ison is helpful in that she gets anything we need for our students. She goes out of her way to find money for equipment and supplies."

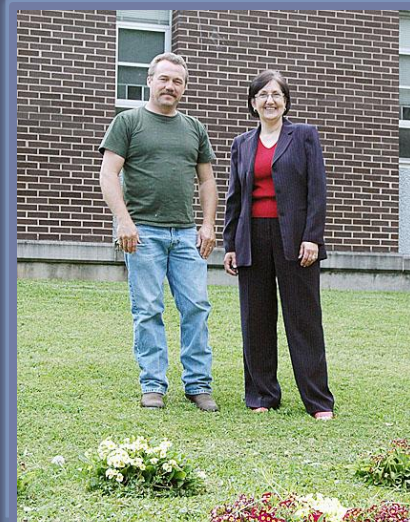
"She is actually a great lady – personally and professionally. She has been most helpful with the program assessment box! She's good."



**Tom Collins
Welding:**

"Barbara Ison has been a good person to work for over the years. She's been great about getting new equipment and supplies. She has found money to help us with what we need and we will miss her when she's gone."

"She is always professional; she demands a lot, but that's part of the deal. She's made it clear many times that we are here for the students. I've got a lot of respect for her. She's tough, but fair."



**William Caudill
Maintenance:**

"She's the best boss I ever had. She lets me do my job."

Dejah Burton
Office Technology:

"Barbara has been a great leader and mentor for me. I began teaching for her in March of 1994. It was my first real teaching experience and was definitely a scary and nerve racking time for me. But, Barbara was always there encouraging me and lending a helping hand anytime I asked. She not only helped me survive that first two months of the teaching experience, but has helped me through my internship, KTIP Resource Teacher training, being a resource teacher, and the preparations for vocational principal. She is a great role model."



Karen Boggs, Office Technology:

"I am a first year teacher and I think that anyone who is a teacher can attest to fact that your first year of teaching is spent keeping your head above water. My first year has been stressful, but would have been impossible without the help of my principal Barbara Ison."

Ms. Ison has always been available to help me no matter what I have asked or needed. Her meticulous, hard work as an administrator has greatly benefited our students, school and community. I wish that I would have had the opportunity to work many more years with Ms. Ison. She has been a great role model for many people and will be greatly missed as Letcher Co. ATC principal."



Daryn Pigman,
Diesel Technology:

"Ms. Ison has helped me adjust to the challenges that face a new instructor by giving sound advice, providing funding to bring the program up to today's standards, and helping out no matter what issue comes up."

"The diesel program at Letcher County ATC is one of three in the state on the secondary level. I have always felt that Ms. Ison takes great pride in being one of the best in the state."

"Ms. Ison is always there to help her instructors in any way she can. When she helps, it gives us more time in the classroom with our students. I wish her the best in her retirement and I can only speak for myself when I say, she will be missed. In closing, the system needs more Barbara Isons."





***Barbara Ison and
Mary Stratton***

***Mary Stratton
Kentucky Tech Area Supervisor:***

"In all organizations there is someone considered to be the 'Go to Person' and Barbara Ison is definitely one of those people. She is an excellent administrator, respected not only for her ability, but for her willingness to help others in need.

"Barbara has been a tremendous support for the principals and me when seeking advice and solving problems. I personally appreciate her common sense approach in making decisions, putting students first and being accessible. I admire her high standards in education.

"I wish her the best of luck on her retirement and know that she will be missed not only as an administrator, but also as a friend to technical education."

Letcher County Schools Superintendent Anna Craft:



"Barbara Ison and I have known each other both personally and professionally for more than 25 years. Over the past 10 years, we have worked tirelessly to try to improve the status of the vocational school. Our vision has always been to add another building beside our new high school."

"Over time, we have written documents, made presentations, talked with business people, board members and principals, and visited multiple governors' offices in search of funding. We talked with anyone who had a dollar or a dream because we wanted our dream to become a reality. And, I'm pleased to say we have been successful and can now open bids for the new vocational school. She has always been a woman who had a vision for her school and she never lost sight of it."

"Barbara is one of the most meticulous, detailed professionals that I have ever had the pleasure of working with. I have personally watched her stand her ground with anyone and everyone to get what she felt the students in her school needed. It's refreshing to see someone so dedicated to what they are doing."

"Last year, Barbara informed me she was going to retire and I talked her into staying. Now, she really is retiring and I will miss her being at the helm of the area technology center. She is a very dynamic individual and her shoes will be hard to fill."





***Stephen Boggs, Principal
Letcher County Central High School:***

"Barbara and I have worked together since 1994 - she in her current position and I as a high school principal and former assistant principal. We have always worked closely and very cooperatively to plan yearly schedules, activities, and events so as to create more and diverse opportunities for students to learn.

"During the 2004-05 school year, I worked as principal of Letcher Central planning for the consolidation of our previous three county high schools into one. This took place in the fall of 2005. During that planning year, Barbara welcomed and hosted my future staff and me many times at her facility for planning sessions and professional training. She

always provided us with anything we needed and allowed her staff to participate along the way.

"Barbara has been staunchly active in pursuing avenues for funding and removing barriers for the construction of a new Letcher County Area Technology Center to be adjoined to the Letcher County Center High School facility. Very shortly, this long pursuit will be reality - largely due to Barbara's input and efforts. She has always been driven by her vision of enabling students to succeed in the vocation of their choice.

"Barbara is a fellow Letcher Countian and fellow educator with whom I share common educational vision and with whom I have enjoyed working. Upon her retirement, I will certainly miss the sixteen-year professional relationship we have shared as educators."

Awards and Recognition

Ison receives 2009 Paul Harris Fellow Award

Awarded by fellow Rotarians, Ison was recognized for her distinguished service as a member of the Rotary Club of Whitesburg, Kentucky. She has served as club President and Treasurer for two years each and currently serves on the board as immediate Past President.

The Paul Harris Fellow Award is named after Paul P. Harris, founder of Rotary International.



2002 Cabinet for Workforce Development 110% Award Finalist.

Photo at right: Former Department for Technical Education Deputy Commissioner Mary Stratton, Ison, and Commissioner Emil Jezik.



At left: 2005 Kentucky Tech Administrative Staff Achievement Award. From left to right: Department for Workforce Investment Commissioner Laura E. Owens; Letcher Co. ATC Principal Barbara Ann Ison and OCTE Deputy Executive Director Lewis D. Carter.

**Ison also won the 1998 Kentucky Tech Administrative Staff Achievement Award.*



The Finley Begley Scholarship

Upon the death of former Regional Director Finley Begley, a group of individuals created a scholarship in his memory. Barbara Ison was responsible for setting up the scholarship, including the Articles of Incorporation. During the 2008 Kentucky Tech Principals' meeting at summer conference, the Finley Begley scholarship was launched. Donations in the amount of \$1,000 each were received from KY Tech- Letcher Co. ATC, Belfry ATC, and Floyd Co. ATC. Mary Stratton, Kentucky Tech area supervisor and Fran Dundon, branch supervisor each made a \$100 donation to the fund. The first scholarship will be given this year.

Ison:

"Finley Begley was a mentor to me and many others during his extraordinary career. When he retired, he had 46 years in technical education and continued to work part-time for the system.

"He was always concerned with students having clothes, equipment and supplies. The month before he died, he delivered donated materials to schools in our region. This scholarship is a way to memorialize the man and his love for career and technical education."

Annette Harris, Belfry ATC principal:

"This is an outstanding way to show appreciation to someone who has meant so much to so many and Barbara Ison was the perfect person to oversee this important scholarship.

"I met Barbara Ison when I began my tenure as a principal in 2002. She was assigned as my 'principal mentor.' It could not have been a nicer gift. I gained knowledge, advice, resources, a daily contact person and a continued relationship that has grown into friendship. I consider her a lifelong friend.

"Barbara has been a mentor to so many new principals during her tenure, she will be missed."



Finley Begley



*(l to r): Lenville Martin,
Floyd Co. ATC principal;
Ison, and Annette Harris,
Belfry ATC principal.*

Question and answer session with Barbara Ison



1. What is your greatest contribution?

"I think my greatest contribution has been building a good working relationship with both local school districts and our community. I was born and raised in Letcher County and am not shy about asking for what we need and want for the school.

"I will have to say that I have never asked anyone in the community or in either of the school districts to do anything for us that they have failed to do if it was within their means and capability. When our help is needed, we give it. This is one of the main reasons our school is so successful. In my opinion, we are so much better if we all work together because our combined efforts benefit students."

2. How do you think people will remember you?

"I would like to think that people would say that I was fair, hard working and dedicated, and that I never asked anyone to do anything that I wasn't willing to do myself. I hope that students will remember me as someone who cared about them and believed they could do anything or be anything if they worked at it."

3. What advice do you have for new principals?

"Don't be afraid to ask for help. You have, at your disposal, a wealth of knowledge and experience across this system. People have a lot more respect for someone who is willing to ask for help or to go through the steps of finding out an answer."

"Draw on the ideas and experiences of the staff to help make decisions. There is nothing wrong with saying you need to think about an idea before giving an answer."

4. What do you consider to be the most important issue facing vocational-technical education today?

"I think that sufficient funding is our biggest obstacle right now. We are asked to do more with less. We have trouble attracting qualified teachers because we can't offer them a competitive salary."

"In my opinion, we need to get back to teaching students the skills they need to go out and get a job. We really did a better job of teaching students technical skills ten years ago than we do now. We outfit our schools with excellent equipment, but we don't have students long enough to teach them how to use it."





5. What are the qualities that make a good principal?

"I think a good principal is one who leads by example, communicates well with staff, and motivates staff members to be the best they can be. It's a person who can see the big picture, listens well and doesn't mind hard work. It's a 'we' not 'me' person because we are so much better as a team than alone.

"A good principal finds the good in every student, is not afraid to say he/she doesn't know the answer and, is willing to find it.

"A good principal is one who puts the staff and students before the paperwork. The paperwork can be done any time, but a student or staff member might need you now."

Editor's Note:

We meet many individuals throughout the course of our professional careers; however, it's always a rare treat when you find one that gives more than they expect to get. According to many, you fit neatly into that category. Giving more also means having opinions, exploring options, chasing dreams, taking chances, standing ground, and learning how to accomplish and then deliver uncommon results. Yes, it also means expecting the best. And, guess what my friend – this is who you are and what you do the best! Enjoy your retirement. You will be missed by many.



Good News Story #323

May 13, 2010

By: Fran Dundon



Office of Career and Technical Education, Education and Workforce Development Cabinet